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equipment, infrastructure, etc. However, SPLOST V collections will not begin until SPLOST IV expires in 2021, as Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris put the SPLOST referendum on the ballot a couple of years early to effectively lower the odds of a collections lapse leading up to 2021.

Ultimately, SPLOST V won the day with 63.19 percent of the vote on Nov. 6, garnering 7,153 YES votes to 4,167 NO votes.

The total sales tax in Union County is 7 cents on the dollar, which includes pennies for current SPLOST IV and ESPLOST V collections. The sales tax will remain at 7 percent when SPLOST V takes over from SPLOST IV collections in April 2021.

Also resulting from the Nov. 6 election, Brian Kemp was determined to be the victor in the drawn-out governor's race.

In the end, Democratic challenger Stacey Abrams – who needed to muster thousands of votes just to force a runoff – acknowledged on Nov. 16 that she didn't have the votes to continue her challenge of Kemp, the majority vote getter.

Kemp's final margin of victory was about 55,000 votes, or 50.22 percent of the statewide vote to Abrams' 48.83 percent.

Union Countians also participated in a General Election Runoff on Dec. 4, which featured two statewide runoff races. The Republican candidates each won their contests: Brad Raffensperger for Secretary of State and Incumbent Chuck Eaton for

Public Service Commission, District 3.

The elections and ESPLOST weren't the only major news to come out of the school system last year, as the Union County Board of Education unanimously decided in January 2018 to hire Union County native John Hill to succeed Dr. Fred Rayfield as superintendent of Union County Schools.

Hill started the 2017-2018 school year in a new administrative position at the board office, having come over from the high school, where he'd served four years as principal.

He was set to take the helm on July 1, 2018, but he ended up starting the job early, in April, when it was announced that Rayfield, citing health and personal reasons, would be finishing out his tenure as associate superintendent working from home.

And Hill hit the ground running, setting in motion one of Union County's other top news stories of the year – the formation of the Union County Schools Police Department.

In just a few weeks' time over the summer of 2018, Hill, his board staff and the school board held a number of meetings to hammer out the details of starting a campus police department.

By their July 17 regular meeting, school board members had gotten funding in place and were ready to have the first members of the newly minted police department sworn in: Chief Chad Deyton, Officer Chad Berry and Officer Jeff McConnell.

As previously reported,

startup costs associated with the new department will total \$579,352.27 in the first year, and moving forward, the police force will cost about \$454,000 annually.

In other big school system news, the Union County High School Boys Cross Country Team made school history by becoming the first UCHS team to win a state championship in November.

Joining the boys in celebrating ultimate victory was girls cross country runner Zoe Sanchez, who won the title of individual Class AA State Champion for the 2018 season.

The Blue Ridge Mountain EMC grabbed a number of headlines throughout 2018, including with the election of two new board members – Jack Lance Jr. of Union County and Gayland Trull of Fannin County – and the re-election of Roy Perren out of Towns County.

Also of note, BRMEMC General Manager Jeremy Nelms and other local power companies pushed back against the planned Tennessee Valley Authority rate increase that went through last August, prompting a visit by TVA President Bill Johnson to the EMC's annual meeting in September, where he sought to explain TVA's financial position to members.

The Union County Gun Club, under the advisement of Union County Sheriff Mack Mason, made big waves last year in its quest for a shooting range on public land, earning the support of many important individuals, including Georgia Director for USDA Rural Development Joyce White,



A very important meeting of the Union County Gun Club with federal, state and local officials at the proposed shooting range site in March 2018.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

then-Secretary of State Brian Kemp, and U.S. Rep. Doug Collins, among others.

A shooting range application was made through the office of Commissioner Paris last year, and resolute steps were taken toward making the range a reality.

The Forest Service held a public meeting on Oct. 24 concerning its progress in processing the application and next steps, and USFS officials traveled to the proposed range site on Dec. 11 to conduct live-fire testing to check for noise issues.

There's still an extensive environmental testing phase to be completed at the site located off Georgia 180, not to mention a subsequent administrative review period and final decision-making process, so it will probably be late summer 2019 before the Forest Service says yes or no to the project.

The Union County Sheriff's Office experienced some major successes in 2018, with its Narcotics Division pulling in a record \$600,000 crystal meth bust in July, while the Criminal Investigations Division recovered more than \$300,000 in stolen property throughout the year.

Developments in the federal prescription drug case against Mike Gowder, Dr. David Gowder and Dr. James Heaton was also big news this past year, with the latest development being the resetting of the three co-defendants' jury trial from Feb. 11, 2019, to a specially set date of April 8, 2019.

The trial was reset due to scheduling conflicts with other big court cases – one federal and one state – that had arisen for Donald F. Samuel, Heaton's attorney.

This week, on Jan. 3, the same federal grand jury that handed up the original 212-count indictment against the co-defendants will be meeting again to consider a superseding indictment regarding potential new charges against Heaton.

All three men pleaded not guilty to the federal charges in April 2018.

As previously reported, prior to their Feb. 4, 2016, arrests in Union County, Mike Gowder was the CEO of Union General Hospital and Dr. Heaton ran a family practice clinic in Blairsville.

Dr. David Gowder was the emergency room director at Union General Hospital at the time of his initial arrest for allegedly attempting to fill fraudulent prescriptions in Fannin County on April 1, 2015, according to authorities.

A fatal accident on Dec. 19 cast a shadow over the holiday season last month, as three Union County residents – Robert Atkinson, Renea



This is 6 kilos of crystal methamphetamine worth approximately \$600,000 in street value confiscated by the Union County Sheriff's Office in July 2018.

Photo by Shawn Jarrard

Lee...from Page 1A

Sgt. Hammond was injured during the foot pursuit, and he will be recovering off duty for some time, said Osborn.

At this time, Lee is facing

multiple felony charges in connection with three alleged vehicle thefts, said Osborn.

Citing the ongoing nature of the investigation, Osborn said he was unable to provide

further details at press time.

Anyone with information as to Lee's whereabouts should call 911 or the Union County Sheriff's Office at 706-439-6066.

Apply now for Beta Epsilon Educator Scholarship

The Future Key Woman Educator Scholarship is awarded by Beta Epsilon chapter of Psi State - Georgia of Delta Kappa Gamma Society International. This chapter includes members from Fannin, Towns and Union counties. The scholarship is awarded to a female resident of one of these three counties who is a rising junior or senior at the college or uni-

versity level in an accredited education program who has demonstrated high academic achievement, leadership experience, involvement in extracurricular activities, community and civic involvement, and a commitment to pursue a degree in education. The 2019 scholarship amount is \$1000.

The deadline for completed application is February

28, 2019 and successful applicants will be notified by April 1, 2019. Incomplete applications will not be considered. The application is available at www.deltakappagamma.org/GA-betaepsilon/scholarship.htm. For more information, please email be.psi.dkg@gmail.com. NT(Jan2.A1)SH

Blairsville native Brad Ballard promoted to State Park Region Manager

Blairsville native Brad Ballard was recently promoted to Region 4 Manager within the Georgia State Parks and Historic Sites system. He will oversee operations of 17 sites in the middle/north Georgia area, including Panola Mountain, Fort Yargo, Red Top Mountain and Sweetwater Creek state parks. Region offices are located inside Hard Labor Creek State Park in Social Circle.

Ballard graduated from Union County High School and earned his bachelor's degree in Organizational Leadership from Valdosta State University. He first worked for Union County's recreation department, then moved to the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR) in 2010 as assistant manager of Stephen C. Foster State Park in the Okefenokee Swamp.



Brad Ballard

He next managed Sweetwater Creek State Park near Atlanta, then Fort Mountain State Park in Chatsworth. Ballard is also a member of the DNR Search and Rescue Team and Cave Rescue Team.

"I'm really happy about this opportunity," said Ballard, "and am looking forward to working with the great team of rangers that's already in place."

Ballard and his wife Pat-sy are currently deciding where to move, putting them closer to his new job and her educational pursuits. Since Georgia State Park managers live in housing within their sites, this will be their first home purchase.

"This is certainly an ex-

citing time for us, since we'll be starting new jobs, new classes and even a new home all at the same time," said Ballard.

Parkinson's Support Group

Please note that the Blairsville, GA area Parkinson's Disease Support Group (PDSG) meets at North Georgia Technical College, meeting room 415. The college is located at 121 Meeks Ave., Blairsville, off Hwy. 515. We meet the second Wednesday at 2 p.m.